

CONFERENCIAS

WHY WE RESIST THE TRUTH ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

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In April this year something very strange happened in Washington. A few months earlier, the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, the most prestigious science body in the land, published a report that concluded:

“A strong, credible body of scientific evidence shows that climate change is occurring, is caused largely by human activities, and poses significant risks for a broad range of human and natural systems.”

Then in April the following resolution was put to the House of Representatives:

“Congress accepts the scientific findings ... that climate change is occurring, is caused largely by human activities, and poses significant risks for public health and welfare.”

The House voted to reject the proposition by 240-184.² The United States is the nation whose scientific achievements dominated the 20th century. Yet the US Congress now believes it can vote down the laws of atmospheric physics. What has happened?

In the minds of US conservatives, climate science—in which some of the best scientists in the world investigate a matter of the gravest public concern—has come to represent the enemy. Why?

Climate science has become enmeshed in the bitter culture war that has divided US society. A backlash against the achievements of the progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the culture war has focussed on questions of gender, sexuality, ethnic diversity and “traditional values”.

Environmentalism was identified early as a political threat by conservatives because it challenged settled assumptions about “man and nature” and criticised the power of big business. So conservatives attacked what they saw as “environmental extremists”, along with “radical feminists”, “militant homosexuals”, “multiculturalism” and “secular liberals”. At its core, the culture war is about which values and behaviours should be common and which differences should be tolerated or encouraged.

Environmentalism was drawn into the culture war because it was seen to destabilize the ideas of progress and mastery of nature, which are traditionally understood as the basis of civilisation and “the American way of life”. However, anti-environmentalism did not gain traction among the

wider public until the early 2000s when—after sustained efforts by conservative activists often backed by fossil fuel corporations over many years—environmentalism began to be identified as one of the central elements of the new surge of right-wing populism.

In the last decade there has opened up a deep divide between liberal and conservative voters in their beliefs about global warming. The opening of this gulf was not an accident but part of a deliberate strategy to cast doubt on the science of climate change. From the mid-1990s Republican Party activists, in collaboration with fossil fuel interests and conservative think tanks, successfully associated acceptance of global warming science with “liberal” views. This has now been thoroughly documented.³ Before this campaign the views of US citizens on global warming were influenced mostly by their attentiveness to the science; now one can make a good guess at an American’s opinion on global warming by identifying their views on abortion, same-sex marriage and gun-control.

Surveys show that among those who dismiss climate science, 76 per cent describe themselves as “conservative” and only three per cent as “liberal” (with the rest “moderate”). Those who reject climate science also overwhelmingly oppose income redistribution policies, programs to reduce poverty and regulation of business. They prefer to watch Fox News and listen to right-wing “shock-jock” Rush Limbaugh.

Climate deniers are disproportionately white, male, middle-aged and conservative—those who feel their cultural identity most threatened by the implications of climatechange.⁴

Those on the left are perhaps as predisposed to sift evidence through ideological filters; but in the case of global warming it happens that the scientific evidence overwhelmingly endorses the liberal beliefs that unrestrained capitalism is jeopardising future well-being, that comprehensive government intervention is needed, and that the environment movement was right all along. For neoconservatives accepting these is intolerable, and it is easier emotionally and more convenient politically to reject climate science.

This has culminated in the rise of the Tea Party, the movement of those who demand their fair share of

injustice. As has now been well-documented, the Tea Party did not emerge spontaneously from popular anger but was heavily funded by the KochBrothers⁵ (the billionaires who set out to use their wealth to bring about a conservative revolution) and heavily promoted by Rupert Murdoch's Fox News.⁶

The vote in April against science in the US Congress reflected the influx of Republicans backed by the Tea Party movement at the mid-term elections. In a mentality reminiscent of the US major who in 1968 said that American troops had to destroy the Vietnamese village in order to save it from communism, Tea Party Republicans seem to have decided they must destroy the Earth in order to save it from environmentalism.

In Europe, the absence of a long-running and rancorous culture war explains the relative weakness of climate denial. Where it does prevail it is associated with parties of the far right. It seems perfectly natural, for example, that the British National Party should adopt a denialist stance and that the manifesto of Norwegian mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik should be full of climate science denial, including praise for Christopher Monckton and dark warnings about the plot by environmentalists to use the UN to take over the world.

In the mainstream press deniers are evident. For example, James Delingpole, a commentator for the *Daily Telegraph* in London, recently complained that Britain's weather bureau, the Met Office, had become part of "the eco-fascist takeover of the world".⁷

Delingpole and his kin are not generally influential in Britain but they may provoke extremists. Delingpole lists some of those who are part of the eco-fascist conspiracy—the Prime Minister, various ministers, "all but five members of the last parliament", the BBC, the Prince of Wales, almost every national newspaper, the European Union, the Royal Society, the New York Times, the Obama administration, and all schools and universities—before concluding "Truly there just aren't enough bullets!"

Science and power

Climate scientists have unwittingly destabilising the political and social order; the results of their research threaten the future of powerful industrialists and challenge comfortable expectations about unlimited consumption growth. Climate science has discovered that our attempts to subdue and exploit the Earth are now turning back on us and threaten our future in profound ways, just as environmentalists have been arguing for four decades.

We have arrived at one of those rare historical fracture points when knowledge diverges from power, portending a long period of struggle before the two are once more aligned. Regrettably, the Earth is not going to put climate change on hold while we work it out; the carbon emissions we put into the atmos-

phere while the struggle goes on will still be changing the climate in a thousand years time.

It is because climate scientists, diligently going about their work, have generated knowledge that challenges power that they have become the target of a campaign of vilification and intimidation. Some of the world's most distinguished climate scientists have become the subjects of a new form of cyber-bullying aimed at driving them out of the public domain. Each time they enter the public debate through a newspaper article or radio interview they are immediately subjected to a torrent of aggressive, abusive and, at times, threatening emails.

For example, Dr. Kevin Trenberth, head of analysis at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Colorado, turned over to university security 19 pages of "extremely foul, nasty, [and] abusive" mails collected in the four months after the Climategate storm broke in November 2009. Another prominent climate scientist had dead animal dumped on his doorstep and now travels with body-guards.

Stephen Schneider, an eminent climatologist at Stanford University who died a few months ago, said last year that he had received hundreds of threatening emails.

Exasperated he asked: "What do I do? Learn to shoot a magnum? Wear a bullet-proof jacket?" He believed that a scientist would be killed. Schneider said he had observed an "immediate, noticeable rise" in emails whenever climate scientists were attacked by prominent right-wing US commentators.

Climate deniers have successfully used the instruments of democratic practice to erode the authority of professional expertise. Techniques have included skilful use of a free media, exploitation of freedom-of-information laws, mobilisation of a group of vociferous citizens, and promotion of their own to public office. At least in the United States and Australia, democracy has defeated science.

The campaign of harassment against scientists took a sinister turn last year when Oklahoma Republican Senator James Inhofe called for some of the world's most eminent climate scientists to be investigated for criminal violations. A document prepared by his staff on the US Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works claims scientists mentioned in emails stolen from the Climatic Research Unit (CRU) at the University of East Anglia are guilty of manipulating data and obstructing its release. It lists federal laws they may have violated and names 17 climate scientists whom Inhofe claims should be investigated for possible criminal prosecution.

One of those listed, Raymond Bradley, the director of climate science research at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, responded: "I am worried about it, I have to say. You can understand that this powerful person is using the power of his office to intimidate people and to harass people and you

wonder whether you should have legal counsel. It is a very intimidating thing and that is the point.”

According to *Scientific American*, deniers in Congress have used their offices to send “intimidating letters” threatening dire consequences to scientists working on climate change. One of the recipients, NASA scientist Gavin Schmidt, said: “That is chilling the work of science in the agencies. It’s certainly very off-putting for scientists who want to talk about their stuff in public but fear the political consequences. Nobody wants to create an enemy on the hill.”

In an editorial last March on cyber-bullying, *Nature* reported on Senator Inhofe’s attempts to criminalise climate scientists before commenting: “As a member of the minority party, Inhofe is powerless for now, but that may one day change.” That day came last November with the mid-term elections in which the Republicans, powered by a surge of support for the Tea Party, won a majority in the House of Representatives.

A series of inquiries has exonerated the scientists whose emails were stolen from the University of East Anglia, and affirmed that there is nothing in them to undermine the science. If you read them, what the hacked UEA emails revealed is the enormous external pressure climate scientists work under. They show they have constantly been accused of being frauds and cheats; their work has been twisted and misrepresented; and they have been bombarded with vexatious freedom-of-information requests orchestrated by denialists.

Wishful thinking

In its active form climate denial has been restricted to small minorities. But their influence spread far and wide. Although most members of the public superficially accept the scientific consensus, by sowing doubt climate deniers provide a reason to accept it with less conviction. Doubts sown by deniers reinforce the psychological mechanisms we all deploy to avoid the unpleasant feelings triggered by exposure to the warnings of climate scientists.

So instead of repudiating the science outright, we admit some of the facts, and allow some of the associated emotions, but do so in distorted form. For example, it is common to hear people reinterpreting the threat by using narratives such as “people have solved these sorts of problems before”, “if it were that bad the government would be doing something about it” and “scientists are probably exaggerating”. The eaked “Climategate” emails were a coup for climate deniers around the world because they seemed to reinforce exactly these sorts of excuses.

Some people derive a peculiar sort of pleasure in describing themselves as “an optimist”. It’s a kind of one-upmanship used to shut down those arguing that the evidence shows the future is not rosy. “Whatever you might say, I am an optimist”, they

intone, implying that their interlocutor is somehow not bold enough to take on the challenge. It’s not so much passive aggression as a sunny aggression firmly rooted in the moral superiority of cheerfulness. This is a modern predilection exposed by Barbara Ehrenreich in her powerful book *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*. If positive thinking can defeat breast cancer, why can’t it defeat climate change?

The power of wishful thinking can be seen in some of history’s great acts of unpreparedness. In 1933 Winston Churchill began warning of the belligerent intentions of Hitler’s Germany and the threat they posed to world peace. In many speeches through the 1930s he devoted himself to alerting Britons to the dangerous currents running through Europe, returning over and over to the martial nature of the Nazi regime, the rapid re-arming of Germany, and Britain’s lack of preparedness for hostilities.

Yet pacifist sentiment among the British public, still traumatized by the memory of the Great War, provided a white noise of wishful thinking that muffled the warnings.

Behind the unwillingness to re-arm and resist aggression lay the gulf between the future Britons hoped for—one of peace—and the future the evidence indicated was approaching—war in Europe; just as today behind the unwillingness to cut greenhouse gas emissions lies the gulf between the future we hope for—continued stability and prosperity—and the future the evidence tells us is approaching—one of danger and sacrifice.

The warnings of Churchill and a handful of others were met with derision. In terms akin to those now used to ridicule individuals warning of climate disaster—“fearmongers”, “doom-sayers”, “alarmists”—he was repeatedly accused of exaggerating the danger, of irresponsibility, of using “the language of blind and causeless panic” and of behaving like “a Malay running amok”.

Late in 1938, Churchill’s trenchant criticism of Chamberlain’s Munich agreement—he called it “a total and unmitigated defeat”—earned him the fury of Conservative party members. Anti-Churchill forces in the party rallied and as late as March 1939—months before war was declared and a year before he was to become war-time Prime Minister—it seemed likely Churchill would be ousted as a Conservative MP by Government loyalists.

Benign fictions

Although we generally think of a willingness to face up to reality as a sign of mental health, a strong case can be made that the normal human mind interprets events in ways that promote “benign fictions” about oneself, the world and the future.⁸ Indeed, in some countries—particularly the United States—there is strong cultural pressure to adopt an optimistic outlook on life.

Cultivating these benign fictions can be a healthy response to an often unfriendly world in which one's self-belief is constantly at risk of a battering, as many young people discover when they enter talent shows. It is well-established that holding a positive view of the future enhances mental health, and that chronic pessimism is associated with anxiety and depression.

"Unrealistic optimism" is a proclivity that leads us to predict what we would prefer to see happen rather than what is objectively most likely. By giving us greater motivation, this can be beneficial. Yet within the phenomenon of unrealistic optimism it is vital to distinguish between illusion and delusion. Illusions respond and adapt to reality as it forces itself on us while delusions are held despite the evidence of the outside world.

The evidence that large-scale climate change is unavoidable has now become so strong that healthy illusion is becoming unhealthy delusion. Hoping that a major disruption to the Earth's climate can be avoided is a delusion. Optimism sustained against the facts, including unfounded beliefs in the power of consumer action or in technological rescue, risks turning hopes into fantasies.

Camus' *The Plague*

Some further insights into modern aversion to facing up to climate science can be drawn from Albert Camus' 1947 novel *The Plague* (*La Peste*), which is typically read as a representation of how the French responded to German occupation. Bubonic plague breaks out in Oran, a town of some 200,000 people in Algeria. It is cut off from the rest of the world for months on end as thousands succumb to horrible deaths.

Dr. Bernard Rieux, the novel's protagonist, is the first to recognise that the mass die off of rats and the strange symptoms of his patients signal the arrival of plague. It took others much longer to accept the facts before them. The citizens of Oran, wrote Camus, "did not believe in pestilence". They told themselves "that it is unreal, that it is a bad dream that will end".

In a comment that applies with great force to the contemporary climate debate, Camus observed that in denying the facts "we continue to give priority to our personal feelings". As the story unfolds, Camus sees into the strategies used by the townspeople to deny or avoid the meaning of the plague. First they tell themselves the deaths are due to something

The End of Humanism

So far I have considered evasion and denial as political, social and psychological processes. But I wonder whether matters go deeper, beyond understanding them as mere human weakness or distorted expression of political objectives. I want to suggest that climate denial in both its active and pas-

else. Then they tell each other the epidemic will be hortlived and life will soon return to normal. Later, they cling to superstitions and prophecies, unearthing old texts that seem to promise deliverance or protection. They begin to drink more wine because a rumour has circulated that wine kills the plague bacillus. Then, when drunk, they offer optimistic opinions into the night air.

After months of the deadly epidemic everyone confined in Oran fears it will never end. There is Jean Tarrou, a mysterious visitor trapped in the quarantined town, who kept a chronicle of events in which the people of Oran were viewed from a distance, as through the wrong end of a telescope. Wrote Camus:

Yes, there was an element of abstraction and unreality in misfortune. But when an abstraction starts to kill you, you have to get to work on it.

As a means of abstracting from suffering, Tarrou's telescope is akin to the approach of some scientists, like James Lovelock, who take up a position somewhere in space from which they dispassionately analyse the possible end of humanity in an abstract kind of way.

Those who are willing to face up to the meaning of the climate crisis can learn something of how to approach such a depressing situation from Camus' hero. Dr. Rieux works tirelessly against overwhelming odds. He knows that any victories against the plague will be short-lived. "But that is not a reason to give up the struggle", he tells his friend; "... one must fight, in one way or another, and not go down on one's knees", an attitude sometimes read as a metaphor used by Camus for the stance of the French Resistance against German occupation.

Camus argued that the only way to maintain one's integrity in such a situation is to adopt what he called an "active fatalism", in which "one should start to move forward, in the dark, feeling one's way and trying to do good." Rieux's active fatalism is similar to the distinction, drawn by Nietzsche, between the pessimism of strength and the pessimism of weakness. Pessimism as strength faces up to the facts as they present themselves, accepts the danger fully, and engages in sober analysis of what is. It is the pessimism of Dr. Rieux, in contrast to that of other citizens of Oran who succumbed to despondency, adopted a submissive stance and capitulated to the situation through a weary knowingness.

sive forms is a means of attempting to resolve a contradiction deep within the modern understanding of the world itself and our role in it.

The central fact of climate science, barely grasped by the public, is that extra carbon dioxide persists in the atmosphere for many centuries. So what we do in the next one or two decades (in addition to emissions from the past) will seal the fate of the Earth's

climate for more than a thousand years, irrevocably transforming the world in ways less amenable to life. For two decades knowledge of the damage we are doing has been readily available yet we have not changed our ways.

This fact drives a dagger into the heart of the modern understanding of the human being, that of world-maker, the Enlightenment subject who creates the future of the world. The idea of humans as world-makers has recently reached its full expression in the definition of a new geological epoch. The Anthropocene, which began a few decades ago, is defined by the fact that the “human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system”.⁹

Climate change in the Anthropocene shows us to be enormously powerful yet, like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, unable to control our power, destabilising our self-understanding as autonomous subjects imposing ourselves on the natural environment. Climate disruption threatens to destroy the deepest idea of modernity—that we create the world, shape our future, and determine our own destiny.

So the evidence of human-induced climate change destabilises the Enlightenment edifice of humanism,

the elevation of human concerns and human reason to primacy and the banishment of other sources of authority. We are learning again what the ancients knew, that the human can never be extracted from its physical environment and that a fractious Earth can intercede at any moment.

In repudiating all higher authorities—tradition, myth, god—humanism forgot that there may be “lower authorities” that needed appeasing, the gods of the underworld, so to speak. As the “slumbering beast” of nature stirs, the idols of the modern world—free will, reason, choice, technology, and unbounded optimism—seem to be losing their potency.

But we cannot see this. Instead we search around for a technological means of conquering the situation, just as we have for 300 years. Grand technological schemes—such as for carbon capture and storage and climate engineering plans to spray sulphate aerosols into the upper atmosphere to reflect more sunlight—can be seen as attempts to reassert our mastery over an increasingly uncooperative natural world.

If this is so then coming to grips with climate change is not merely a question of changing our minds, for we can easily change our minds led house rejects science.



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² See the commentary by Joe Romm at Climate Progress
<http://thinkprogress.org/romm/2011/04/06/207842/gop.led.house.rejects.science.240.184/>

III CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL SOBRE CAMBIO CLIMATICO Y DESARROLLO SUSTENTABLE

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